

STOP “BLAME THE WOMEN” SYNDROME, 17 NOV 2006

The Women’s Centre for Change Penang (WCC) views the recent sexist remarks by the Penang Municipal Council President, Datuk Abu Bakar Hassan, blaming the complainant for her dressing instead of the perpetrator of the CCTV incident, as another grim reminder of the gender insensitivities of some leaders, be they nominated or elected. It was only early this year that women were again blamed for being “gatal” or “causing rape because of indecent clothes” by some MPs.

Enough is enough. How many more times and how long more does the public have to tolerate such unwarranted, sexist remarks by leaders of this nation? This is outrageous and unfounded. When will civil servants or politicians, paid by our taxpayers money, behave appropriately and become gender sensitive? As policy makers of the nation, they are expected to be exemplary to the public and show absolute decorum. Leaders are expected to lead with sensitivity and show good leadership.

Public servants should be accountable for their own words and actions. Sanctions should be taken against them for misbehaviour, verbal or otherwise, without the need to wait for public pressure or media coverage. Otherwise it will not be surprising if such occurrences happen again in the near future.

What goes on in the thinking of men when they make gender insensitive remarks that evoke “blame the women” syndrome? Do these men not feel enraged should their wives, daughters, sisters be blamed when sexual crimes happen to them? Moreover, when such views are perpetuated, how do we expect our society to treat women with respect?

When a crime of a sexual nature occurs, it is crucial that the victim receives unwavering support from the relevant persons and authorities, not blame. WCC’s experience on handling sexual harassment cases has left us frustrated when the harasser is merely transferred out or moved to a different building! Often the victim is left emotionally and psychologically scarred. No wonder many more women chose not to report but rather suffer the trauma.

Yet, more and more women are choosing to report such crimes. These women have to be cheered. They have clearly chosen to pave the way for others that such crimes should not be tolerated.

The government’s Code of Practice against sexual harassment is commendable in principle but toothless in reality. The Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG), of which WCC is a member, has been lobbying for a sexual harassment law in Malaysia for many years but without success. There seems to be a lack of seriousness by the government in wanting to curb this ugly scourge that affects working women.

WCC urges the Women's Ministry to conduct compulsory gender sensitising trainings for all politicians and civil servants so as to inculcate the new mindset that women and men are viewed as equals. We also call for the enactment of a gender equality law to ensure that sexism will be eradicated from society.

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